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# CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

## OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

8 March 1973

### MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Mao and the Political Outlook in China

### MAIN JUDGMENTS

Mao's prestige and authority in China are now such that no known faction seems likely to test his power by trying to set him aside. He will probably dominate policy making in Peking so long as his health permits. Although Mao's final years will probably be dedicated to the search for reliable successors, the odds are that those who follow his generation will be less concerned with Mao's ideology of revolution than with the challenge of turning China into a modern and powerful state. After Mao, the internal scene in China is not likely to be dominated by either extreme of anarchic radicalism or authoritarian suppression. More likely, there will be continued experiments with the moderate, flexible policies now in evidence.

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1. Leadership prospects in China still pivot on the role of Mao. Having dominated the party since 1935, Mao remains the key figure and prime mover in China's troubled leadership. After having put his leaders through a series of purges since 1965, Mao is now preoccupied with sorting the survivors into a trustworthy group capable of carrying out his plans for China. This involves testing the reliability of the new leadership, reorganizing the party, reducing the political role of the military, and regaining firm central control over the power structures in some of the outlying provinces. These problems, which are proving to be difficult and intractable, probably represent the basic agenda of Mao's final years. This memorandum first discusses political problems over what is likely to be the last years of the Mao era, and secondly, makes a tentative assessment of the longer-term impact of Mao's revolutionary line on political life in China.

*Mao's Last Round*

2. There is no indication that Mao is considering giving up power nor is there much likelihood that his prestige and authority could slip so suddenly as to make it easy for any faction to set him aside. While it is a safe bet that Mao will hold onto power as long as he can, it is far more difficult to predict whether his health will continue to permit him an active role. Now in his 80th year, Mao could deteriorate with no

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warning. There is little point in speculating on how this might affect Mao's leadership role. It would depend on timing, the severity of the problem, and the chances of recovery. Nevertheless, any significant impairment of Mao's faculties would naturally increase the chances of his being eased out. But until Mao's death or incapacitation, he is likely to retain his ability to dominate policy-making sessions on those issues about which he feels strongly.

3. In one of the major areas of concern, Mao and Chou are making slow progress in realigning the leadership and reducing the hold of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on political power in the provinces. The purge of Lin Piao and his close allies has diluted the military's role at the center. But Peking now faces the task of weeding out provincial leaders without arousing the united resistance of the PLA. Toward this end Mao and Chou have moved cautiously and deliberately. Rather than risking the consequences of dramatic and wholesale purges, they are following the safer course of slowly infusing civilian party cadre into the provincial parties. For the most part these cadre are experienced officials who suffered during the Cultural Revolution, were removed from office, "rectified," and restored to senior positions in the party.

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4. Military leaders outside Peking are maintaining a low posture. Mao's decisive move against Lin Piao has left the regional commanders with few illusions about their own fate should they try to test Mao's political strength. They have probably concluded that Mao could destroy any of them should he single them out for purging. Whatever their resentment of Mao's downgrading of the political role of the PLA, the response of most military leaders is to give verbal allegiance to Mao, to stay as far from Peking as possible, and with luck, to outlast Mao. Some regional commanders were never close to Lin Piao, may have resented his prominence, and therefore probably found it easy to support Mao in his move against Lin. There are probably also those PLA leaders who are more concerned with professional military duties and who now are pleased to leave political responsibilities and return to military training.

5. But even though the PLA is not monolithic and has not reacted uniformly to its changing political role, there appears to be a general sense of unease throughout the provincial party centers, still manned predominantly by military personnel. This apparently stems in part from the belief that Peking has not completed its purges in the wake of the Lin affair. In addition, it is well understood that Mao is intent on testing his leaders, an excruciating and unpredictable process, if past experience is any guide. Even Mao's oldest comrades know that he would

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not hesitate to discard them if they failed the test. Others, never close to Mao, must fear that they have been tainted by even routine contacts with Lin Piao and his associates. More to the point, in a situation in which the standards of ideological purity have had a tendency toward sudden shifts for obscure reasons, no one can feel immune from attack. As a consequence, provincial leaders have been remarkably withdrawn over the past year, and reports of unsettled conditions in some of the outlying provinces probably reflect tension within an insecure and troubled leadership.

6. In the short run, there is likely to be only slow movement in reordering the provincial leadership. Mao's minimum demand is a leadership that can be trusted to carry out his wishes and not work against him. Mao may believe that he has achieved this on the politburo level by having eliminated Lin Piao and his supporters. In the provinces, it seems clear that the weeding-out process has only begun. The result may in the end bear some resemblance to the present tentative balance at the center. The military will still be represented, but their power will be diluted by the return of old party cadre and a sprinkling of younger recruits; all will ostensibly be Maoists.

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7. As long as Mao persists in his present moderation, even the radically inclined will no doubt play it safe by not getting ahead of him. In any case, enthusiasm for Mao's more radical initiatives will probably remain generally lukewarm. Leaders of the radical left still active at the top level include Mao's wife, Chiang Ching, and the Shanghai leaders, Chang Chun-Chiao and Yao Wen-yuan. All are now remarkably subdued, and no longer stand out as spokesmen for the ultra-left. They are nevertheless still active in official capacities, and one can only conclude that their continuation in power is largely a function of Mao's support. While they no doubt have organizational support from their Shanghai base, it seems doubtful that they could long survive in the present climate without Mao's firm backing. One may even question their adherence to radicalism; their success may have come from enthusiastic support of Mao during a radical phase. Expediency and opportunism may guide their actions more consistently than revolutionary dedication. Even now they may be cementing ties with more moderate leaders in order to insure their survival after Mao dies. This seems especially true of Chang Chun-Chiao, who, unlike the other two, has no family ties to Mao.

8. Thus, in assessing the chances of a resurgence from the radical left, the prospects seem to depend less on the few survivors than on the actions of Mao himself. Without Mao's backing and guidance, it is hard to

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imagine -- so soon after the violence and disruption of the Cultural Revolution -- any group successfully reversing present policies and obtaining widespread support for another turn to the left. Even Mao might find it impossible to sustain another leftward shift. There is widespread evidence of disillusion in China with the costly and frightening campaigns that have upset life periodically under Mao. While few would dare to question openly the leadership of Mao, most probably feel more comfortable with the relaxed and permissive phases between Mao's major upheavals.

9. To the degree that the present moderate course generates success, to that degree it becomes more difficult to return to the self-denial and sacrifice of the revolutionary campaigns. All reports out of China indicate a general relief that political pressures have eased, that the small freedoms of private plots and free markets have survived, that the destructive fanaticism of the Cultural Revolution has ended. There are also reports of general satisfaction with China's new prestige and enhanced role in the world. There is obvious pride that China is modernizing its economy without major aid from any foreign power. At the same time there is some appreciation of the slowly rising standard of living. It may also be apparent that such improvements come, not during political campaigns, but in the intervals between.

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10. Nevertheless, it is possible that Mao will change his mind again and seek to launch another sharp turn to the left. In such a case, those now carrying out the relatively moderate policies would be held responsible for "rightist" errors. Chou En-lai would be particularly vulnerable because of his close identification with moderate and flexible policies. While the possibility exists that Mao and Chou could clash, there is nothing in Chou's background to suggest that he would permit himself to be caught in such a head-on conflict. Nor would Chou be likely to seek military backing for any maneuvers against Mao. It is a measure of Chou's circumspection that he has never permitted himself to appear to be bidding for Mao's position. While Chou has always been close to Mao, he has been careful not to get too close; i.e., he has never been designated the successor to Mao. Chou may still be seeking to escape this honor.

11. In short, Mao seems in little danger of being set aside in his final years -- assuming of course that he is not incapacitated by severe health problems. Whether Mao will live long enough to set up a firm line of succession remains open to question. Over the longer run, the more important question is whether the successors, whoever they may be, will try to duplicate the revolutionary style of Chairman Mao, or whether they will move toward less ideological, more pragmatic positions.

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*Maoism: How Long Will It Survive Mao?*

12. Over the longer run, it is almost impossible to predict who will emerge into leadership roles after Mao and Chou have departed the scene. Nor is it much easier to estimate the relative strength of factions that will be contesting for these leadership positions. What seems feasible at this point is to assess the impact of Maoism on the function of leadership and to examine how this may affect the role of future leaders.

13. There is a striking contradiction between Mao's personal style of leadership and his doctrinal conception of how leaders should operate. Idiosyncratic and charismatic, Mao has always tended to exploit his innate flair for leading others along his preferred path. His enormous ego has rarely failed to provide the firm convictions necessary to overwhelm those around him. The power of Mao's personality has probably swayed more meetings than the logic of his thoughts. Whenever he has faced challenges from his fellow leaders, Mao's response has more often been a power play than an accommodation to views that differed from his own. Mao has dominated major decisions in the party for nearly 40 years because he was convinced -- and had the power to convince others -- that only he had the answers for China. In theory and in practice, the "vanguard" was leading the masses.

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14. On the other hand, Mao feels strongly that the masses have creative energies that are rarely exploited. Too often, in Mao's view, bureaucratic and elitist leaders have blocked the potential contributions of the people by treating them as ignorant pawns to be moved about at the whim of their superiors. Mao sees "mass participation" as the antidote for authoritarian "commandism", and by attacking the privileges and perquisites of the elite, Mao hopes to reduce the distance between the leaders and the led.

15. In seeking to modernize China even while he revolutionizes it, Mao has been aware of the underlying contradictions. He recognizes the need to industrialize but he fears that the resulting division of labor and specialization of function will widen rather than reduce inequalities in income and privilege. His revolutionary goals are to reduce the traditional differences between mental and manual labor, between rural and urban life, between the producer and the administrator, and most importantly, between the masses and their leaders.

16. Mao also has a profound distrust of experts. He charges that they rely more on book-learning than experience, use their special knowledge to dominate technical decisions and block the initiatives of the masses, and worst of all, combine into elites to protect their special privileges. In Mao's view, experts tend to be more concerned with their careers than with serving the people.

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17. Despite this deeply ingrained suspicion of elitist leaders, Mao has managed to elevate himself above the masses by the creation of a personality cult that gave him coequal rank with the other communist deities, Marx and Lenin. Rather than the masses deciding what was best for them, it has more often been Mao who has decided for them. Rather than breaking down the barriers between leader and led, Mao has managed to isolate himself from the life of the masses. But what applies to Mao does not apply to other leaders. Middle and lower ranking leaders are expected to renew themselves through periodic manual labor and from time to time to suffer the criticism of the masses. Thus, even though Mao has exempted himself from much of what he demands of lower level cadre, the new injunctions against a bureaucratic elite are apparently having an effect. There is some question, however, if such changes will long outlive Mao.

18. The revolution is aging. It is getting harder to maintain an aura of upheaval and change. The early revolutionary battles have all been won; the landlords and capitalists have been wiped out; new class enemies are more difficult to find and less convincing to the public. The class struggle of 30 or 40 years ago is degenerating into power struggles, brought on in part by Mao's obsession with keeping the revolution alive. During the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution, Mao forced a

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revolutionary pace, but at heavy economic and organizational cost. As a result, there appears to be a growing concern in China that Mao's "continuous revolution" will prove counter-productive. The sacrifices in each campaign are increasingly seen as outweighing the gains.

19. Certainly there is little prospect for another Mao to lead the struggle for radical solutions. No one prominent on the present scene appears as dedicated to revolutionary methods as Mao, and, more important, no one is likely to wield his enormous power. If it comes soon, the initial succession will probably be a collegium, in which the military will have the most weight, but in which Chou En-lai will probably be first among equals. A leadership coalition between Chou's bureaucrats and the PLA's generals will more likely reinforce present moderate trends than threaten new revolutionary moves. In this they are unlikely to receive serious opposition from the surviving "true believers" in Maoism.

20. Of the so-called radicals still on the politburo, both Chiang Ching and Yao Wen-yuan are likely to lose power when their patron Mao dies. The third, Chang Chun-chiao, may well survive the succession and prosper. Chang is currently using his power base in Shanghai effectively and proving to be a good administrator. No longer playing the role of an ultra-radical, Chang is showing flexibility and pragmatism in adjusting to whatever is demanded of him. He is showing excellent survival traits for a bureaucrat, but he hardly looks like the revolutionary successor to Mao.

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*Policy Implications*

21. Whatever the outcome of the succession, any leadership will inherit a legacy of specific problems that will tend to limit the spread of policy options and lessen the chances of radical swings from the present line. To be brief, it is only necessary to mention the press of population on food resources and the probable persistence of Sino-Soviet tensions -- the latter involving continued priority for national defense research and production. Simply to maintain the present austere standards of living, meet the requirement of defense, and stimulate further economic development will tax the managerial skills of the new leadership. To do all these things expeditiously will almost certainly require the continued growth of foreign trade since China can hardly afford the luxury of self-reliance in developing new technology. Taken together, these considerations suggest that only severe internal upheavals or sharp rebuffs from abroad would cause a marked shift in China's present foreign policy.

22. The question of internal line appears more complicated. Material expectations among the people, for example, have been stimulated by the economic achievements of the past 20 years. But China's new leaders will find it difficult to stretch scarce resources to meet such consumer demands and still fulfill the broader national priorities. The successors will

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almost certainly be less persuasive in the use of ideological incentives than was Mao. But they may also find that it is too costly to abandon such efforts and shift to material incentives.

23. The net result may be stiffer discipline for the Chinese people. Without Mao's charisma and authority, the new leaders may be inclined to rule with a more forceful hand. This would tend to increase the odds that the military will play a major role in the succession.

24. But a tougher approach could arouse resistance from what is likely to be a less compliant public. Political sophistication has been growing rapidly in China; for the first time the people expect some voice in policy matters directly affecting their own livelihood. By encouraging the people to question their leaders, Mao has probably guaranteed that his successors will face a less passive population.

25. Thus, the internal scene in China after Mao is not likely to be dominated by either extreme of anarchic radicalism or authoritarian suppression. There are more likely to be continued experiments based on the moderate, flexible approaches now in evidence. Although Mao's revolutionary line will probably receive full credit -- justifiably so -- for speeding up social change and enabling the Chinese people to "stand up",

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his emphasis on struggle and periodic upheaval is not likely to survive him. Mao's successors will probably be more concerned with channelling those traditional Chinese virtues of hard work and adaptability into the pursuit of widely shared goals for a better life for individuals and a more powerful and honored role for China.

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. John Holdridge  
NSC Staff

The attached memorandum deals with an old subject, but I felt some of the speculation, particularly in the latter half of the paper, would be of interest.

9 March 1973  
(DATE)

FORM NO. 101 REPLACES FORM 10-101  
1 AUG 54 WHICH MAY BE USED.

MEMORANDUM FOR: General D. O. Graham, DIA

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Paul Popple, INR

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9 March 1973

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